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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: PRESIDENT CHEN SHUI-BIAN'S CONSTITUTIONAL
REFORM PROPOSAL

¶1. Summary: Taiwan major Chinese-language dailies focused their coverage September 26 on Premier Su Tseng-chang's plan to confer with major political party leaders for a settlement of the current political stand-off; on the follow-on movements of former DPP Chairman Shih Ming-teh's campaign to oust President Chen Shui-bian; and on the U.S. State Department's reaction Monday to President Chen's proposed constitutional reforms that touch on the island's territory. Both the pro-status quo "China Times" and the pro-unification "United Daily News" front-paged the remarks by the State Department Monday. The "China Times" news story ran with a headline that said "United States Warns Bian That Constitutional Reforms Must Not [Involve] Territorial Change," and the headline of the "United Daily News" story said "United States Does Not Permit Taiwan to Change Territory." The pro-independence "Liberty Times," Taiwan's largest circulation daily, also carried a news story on page two with the headline "United States Reminds: Bian Has Pledged That Constitutional Revision Does Not Touch on Territory."

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, an opinion piece in the "United Daily News" said President Chen's constitutional reform proposal that touches on territorial definition can no longer trigger a cross-Straits crisis. A "China Times" editorial also criticized Chen for leading the DPP in trying to push the envelope. An editorial in the limited-circulation, conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" said, "What Taiwan's people want now is not a better Constitution but a clean and honest president and a responsive and responsible government." End summary.

A) "Writing a New Constitution to Stir up More Trouble? Bian Cannot Cause a Ripple"

Professor Edward Chen of Tamkang University's Graduate Institute of American Studies opined in the pro-unification "United Daily News" [circulation: 400,000] (9/26):

"The new constitutional issue regarding unification and independence raised by Chen Shui-bian will no longer be able to trigger a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. ... Why has it become unlikely for the constitutional issue with regard to territorial change issue that he has tossed off to cause reverberations in the United States, China, and Taiwan?

"Judged from Washington's perspective, first, the United States knows that Chen is anxious to extricate himself from the troubles caused by the campaign to oust him. But Washington does not believe that the scandal-plagued Chen is capable of launching a movement to push for the writing of a new constitution or to conduct a referendum on the new constitution at this moment. Second, the United States judges that, given the development of the 'Oust Bian' campaign, the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) led by Lee Teng-hui has

changed its initial plan to draw a line between itself and Chen; instead, the TSU is hoping to reap where it has not sown by taking this opportunity to take over the voters who want to support neither Bian nor the Blue camp. Even the TSU, which has always been keen on the unification versus independence issue, has come to realize that writing a new constitution is simply a trick Chen is using to get himself out of trouble. As a result, the future prospect of the move to write a new constitution or to conduct a referendum on a new constitution is already self-evident.

"In addition, from June to September this year, Chen has twice explained his stance to AIT Chairman Raymond Burghardt, assuring him that constitutional reforms would not touch on sensitive issues, nor would they exceed the current constitutional stipulations. Even though Chen is mercurial, and it will not come as a surprise if he breaks his promise again, does he really dare to turn against the United States now? Besides, even though Stephen Young, the inspector that Washington has posted to Taipei, has a gentler attitude compared with that of his predecessor Douglas Paal, he is certainly not ambiguous when it comes to principles. ..."

B) "Starting Dialogue Is the First Step for Resolving Stand-off"

The pro-status quo "China Times" [circulation: 400,000] editorialized (9/26):

"... In addition to the inappropriate moves by the ruling party to mobilize its supporters to counterattack the campaign against the president, President Chen seems to be very eager to move closer to the radical Taiwan independence force. Chen has been taking bolder and bolder actions, starting from changing the name of the [Chiang Kai-shek] airport, to pushing for Taiwan's bid to join the United Nations using the name of Taiwan, and to showing intentions to change the articles in the Constitution concerning Taiwan's territory.

"It is really difficult to figure out the strategic logic behind the line [Chen] is taking now and his appeal [to his party]. Did he do so just to show his stance to the hasty independence force, which accounts for less than 20 percent of the people in Taiwan, in exchange for a limited sense of security? One must know that, over the past three months, Chen has twice guaranteed to the United States that Taiwan's future constitutional reforms would not touch on sensitive issues such as the country's title and its territory. Now, not only is the country's title to be changed, but the proposal of a new constitution [redefining] Taiwan's territory has also become a mainstream view of the DPP. All the more, Chen is leading his party personally to push the envelope. Is it possible that Chen will not stop until wars start to break out everywhere [on the island]? ..."

C) "Charter Change a Diversion"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] wrote in an editorial (9/26):

"President Chen Shui-bian and his Democratic Progressive Party are at it again - championing China-provoking constitutional reforms to divert public attention from the scandal-plagued president and the growing unpopularity of the ruling party. Immediately after he put his signature on the new charter, President Chen pledged to push for debates on a new Constitution, including the explosive issues of sovereignty, territory and formal independence for the self-ruled island. Chen's relentless pursuit of Taiwan independence has incurred the wrath of the island's No. 1 enemy China and the irritation of its mentor and protector the U.S., causing political upheavals, economic stagnation and social division at home. ...

"Constitutional reform is welcome when necessary, but not desirable when it irritates foes and allies alike and disturbs internal political stability. What Taiwan's people want now is not a better Constitution but a clean and honest president and a responsive and responsible government."

WANG